

**Creating Partnerships on Campus to Facilitate Practical Experiences**

by Craig M. Becker, Hans Johnson, Michael P. McNeil and Karen Warren

Abstract

College campuses create small communities where mutually beneficial partnerships can be used to create practical work experiences for students. The procedure outlined in this article outlines how to create a partnership between the campus health and recreation center and an academic department to evaluate the implementation of a new smoking policy. The campus project helped students develop research, presentation, and group work skills. Additionally, this partnership enhanced campus health services as it improved the education of students by bridging the gap between theory and practice. The methodologies described here are applicable for most majors on almost any college campus.

While most agree practical experience is beneficial (Peterat & Smith, 2001), the application of introducing students to their profession has many obstacles. Conflicting student obligations include full course schedules, jobs, and family responsibilities. For this reason, many academic preparation programs routinely require internships to give students the opportunity to appreciate course material as well as practice skills (Stanton, 1992). Universities and colleges, however, create small communities and therefore offer the potential to create mutually beneficial partnerships where students are given an opportunity to use professional skills on campus.

This paper provides a skeleton outline on how instructors can partner with organizations or groups on campus to offer practicum opportunities for students. The approach utilizes student class projects that emphasize the collection of data, analysis of statistics, and literature reviews that identify "best practices." Objectives for this approach are:

1. To provide students practical experiences;
2. To enhance services offered on campus;
3. Building of partnerships for practical experience.

The practice and development of professional skills can be problematic for students because most professional skills improve from application. For example, in health education, evaluation is a core competency (National Commission for Health Education Credentialing [NCHEC], 2006) and is an expected skill of graduating students (Becker & Loy, 2004). In a recent study, it was noted that health educators, like many other professionals, spend only a small amount of time on evaluation. Findings indicated that evaluation was not attended to because of inadequate skills and or experience

(Johnson, Glascoff, Lovelace, Bibeau, & Tyler, 2005).

The example outlined in this article provided health students with practical evaluation experiences by partnering with the professional health educator and the staff at a campus health and recreation center. The partnership technique described can be adapted to most professional skills because of the multiple opportunities available on any campus. As is often the case for most campus services, the campus health and recreation centers lack the workers or resources to adequately evaluate their programs. Additionally, students need practical experience conducting evaluations. The opportunity to evaluate campus health programs provided a great opportunity to form a partnership. Similar to many larger universities, on the authors' campus the health educator and the staff plan and conduct health programs for campus students, faculty, and staff. Their services include individual consultation, group presentations, free health screenings, planned health events, and the challenging job of creating a campus environment that promotes and endorses health. Supportive environments are noted to be the most effective method to produce lasting changes with regard to health behaviors (O'Donnell, 2002).

Build Partnership

To initiate this partnership the instructor established contact with university health services staff to review potential projects. Desired outcomes were articulated and agreed upon at this meeting. Next, the scope and timing of the project was integrated into the curriculum. It was agreed that the instructor would first help students intellectually understand the functions they would perform. Generally, this understanding evolved from a traditional classroom text-lecture format. Later in the semester, students applied their newly learned skills in a practical experience project that occurred with an identified campus organization. Additionally, students also benefited from an introduction to ethical standards and use of Internal Review Board (IRB) forms for projects with human subjects. The project evaluation outlined here required approval from the IRB. To expedite this process, early in the semester a member of the IRB made a presentation to introduce participating students to university requirements for projects involving volunteer human participants.

As an example, in the initial meeting between an instructor and campus health and recreation center personnel, it was agreed that students would create groups to evaluate the level of community awareness and the satisfaction and compliance with a new smoking policy implemented on campus. Campus health services personnel were responsible for implementing the new policy and partnering with an academic department provided them with the resources to evaluate these efforts.

Project Procedure

Students, who were enrolled in a research and evaluation health

class, undertook an evaluation project as part of their curriculum. The project required student groups to use the new skills they were learning in class. Initially, students gathered secondary data about smoking policies to develop a basis upon which to draw conclusions. To begin their research process, they participated in a library class that outlined available research tools. For the project, groups were required to create a review of related literature. Students gathered articles about the implementation of restrictive smoking policies, compliance with the policy, and nonsmoker and smoker satisfaction with regard to smoking policy regulations. These articles helped students understand issues related to smoking policies. The campus health services personnel also shared all of their materials associated with the new policy. To assure completion of the project, due dates were made for each project component. For example, the instructor evaluated and provided feedback on the first stage of their project, review of related literature, and each subsequent stage to help the students stay on task.

After IRB approval was received and students had learned about collecting primary data, information was collected from campus health and recreation services program directors/facilitators, health promotion professionals, students, faculty, staff, and other personnel on campus. Relevant surveys about smoking were discovered in their review of related literature and these surveys were used as an effective way to collect quantitative and qualitative primary data. Data collected were cleaned, coded, and reviewed. Student and instructor discussions led to a student led, instructor assisted analysis of data to determine if data supported the student hypothesis that smoking policy changes met the needs of people on campus.

The review students completed for this project also required them to learn more about current campus efforts designed to address smoking. The objective of this research was to determine if existing efforts were being used to their capacity, or if there was a need for a program or service change. The capstone of the project was a research report prepared and organized by students that drew conclusions from the data collected. The conclusions drawn from this project were intended to improve existing programs, or suggest the implementation of additional health programs. The project culminated with students doing a professional multimedia presentation to all involved parties.

Specific findings were captured using questionnaires that asked about satisfaction, adherence, and their knowledge of the new policy. The new smoking policy moved smokers away from common areas, building entrances, and at least 25 feet from buildings. Students summarized findings and were encouraged to draw inferences from the data and discuss recommendations. Findings indicated high satisfaction and compliance by both smokers and nonsmokers that were aware of the new policy. To reach those on campus unaware of the new policy, student recommendations focused on building awareness and creating education campaigns. University personnel implementing the new policy indicated that the student findings and recommendations were valuable and useful.

Each group was also required to write up a research report using American Psychological Association (APA) style guidelines. Their research report included a review of related literature, methods, results, and conclusions. Copies of their research reports were given to the instructor and allied organization(s). Students reported that requiring them to present their work to all allied parties instilled a sense of value in their completed projects and motivated them to work diligently.

It is also recommended that student efforts be done as group projects. Groups facilitated peer discussions about issues related to the project. The use of group projects was also valuable because it helped students learn group skills required to work effectively with others, as so often is required in the professional field.

Other Potential Projects

Other projects have included an analysis of the effectiveness/satisfaction of: a relationship-building program, of the health promoting potential of the campus environment, and a diabetes screening program completed on campus (article under review). Partner projects have many possibilities and can be tailored to specific disciplinary skills. Additional student projects focused on needs assessments and program planning. All projects completed have included professional multimedia presentations, research reports, and recommendations.

Conclusions

Each practical experience project helped students build research, presentation, and group work skills. Research indicates employers value students that have real world work experience as an adjunct to typical class work (Becker & Loy, 2004). Practical experiences are also a valued technique for skill acquisition (Peterat & Smith, 2001). Overall, the partnerships on a college campus can provide an example of win-win scenarios because all parties benefit from the partnership. Partnering campus organizations are able to accomplish more because students provide additional resources in the form of skilled workers. Students benefit because the practical résumé-building experiences used in class projects make them more marketable (Becker & Loy, 2004). Instructors benefit because they improve their college teaching efforts by helping student's bridge the gap between theory and practice.

This article was written to demonstrate approaches to enhancing practical experiences of students. Multiple sources, most notably all involved parties, have indicated they received benefit and value from these partnership experiences. It is recommended that such partnerships be created as a complement to traditional classroom instruction.

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 [Contents](#)

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